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SUBJECT: (C) SUNNIS ASCENDANT IN DIYALA

REF: BAGHDAD 409

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CLASSIFIED BY: Scott Dean, Regional Coordinator (Acting), Reo
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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (U) This is a SET Ba'qubah cable.

12. (C) SUMMARY: The announcement of the results of the December 15 Council of Representatives elections has punctuated a scramble by the IIP to put together a coalition of Sunni Arab leaders in Diyala that can claim to represent the interests of the majority of the province's population. Sunni leaders, both independent and partisan, seem ready to join the nascent IIP-led, MARAM-modeled coalition. Meanwhile, Shi'a contacts are beginning to grouse quietly about Sunni "cheating," though without any concrete examples. While new provincial elections seem unlikely to occur in the near future, the psychological effects of Diyala's election are already having an effect on the dynamics of power within the province. END SUMMARY.

13. (C) On February 10, the IECI announcement of final results (Reftel) was greeted with a shrug - Diyala's political elite has been operating for weeks on the assumption that Diyala's seats would line up as they have now been certified. The results - in which six of ten seats went to Sunni Arabs, and only two to Shi'a Arabs - were a clear repudiation of the current structure of Diyala's provincial council, where the Sunni Arab-led bloc controls just over a third of the 41 seats and the Shi'a bloc controls just under half. Prominent Sunni Arabs have been scrambling to align themselves for upcoming provincial elections in expectation of a realignment of power.

14. (C) The breakdown of the Sunni's six seats - in which only four went to the Tawaffuq Front, while one apiece went to the Iraqiyya and National Dialogue lists - indicates that space exists in Diyala for secular Sunni representation. Two boycotts in the January 2005 elections prevented secular Sunnis from joining the current Provincial Council: a boycott by secular Ba'athists, and one by supporters of then-Governor Abdullah Rashid al-Juburi, after technicality kept his cross-sectarian list off the ballot. In the December elections, both of these constituencies appear to have come out in force to vote for the Iraqiyya and National Dialogue lists.

MARAM FOR DIYALA

15. (C) The IIP appears to have noticed this space as well, and to be moving quickly to close it. Diyala IIP Chairman Hamdi Hassun al-Zubaydi claims that the IIP will be able to capture

the votes that went to the Iraqiyya and National Dialogue lists by incorporating members of the organizations supporting those lists, along with prominent Sunnis not affiliated with any party. The result, Zubaydi believes, will be an absolute majority going to a MARAM-like bloc (COMMENT: whose backbone would be solidly composed of the IIP).

¶16. (C) This is not just idle talk. Khalid al-Sinjari, mayor of Ba'qubah and the most prominent Sunni Arab officeholder in Diyala not affiliated with the IIP, noted to SET that the IIP had already approached him about participation in a potential coalition for the upcoming election. Sinjari suggested that others in his circle of independent Sunnis had been in contact with the IIP as well. Like Zubaydi, he pictures the formation of a coalition mirroring MARAM, with Sinjari himself in a leading role.

¶17. (C) Party activists appear just as open to inclusion in an IIP-dominated list as independents. Diyala INA Chairman (and victorious Iraqiyya list CoR candidate) Hussam al-Azzawi reluctantly admits that the INA will not be going it alone in the next provincial election - nor will it stake its hopes for representation on a coalition that mirrors the Iraqiyya list. As for the National Dialogue list, Zubaydi claims that its winning CoR candidate in Diyala - Muhammad Katuf Mansur, a member of the Arab Democratic Front (ADF) - has already joined Tawaffuq; the inclusion of the ADF into Tawaffuq should presumably make it easy to secure the adherence of its partisans to a MARAM-like coalition in the provincial elections.

¶18. (C) The lack of any majority bloc in the current provincial council has forced all of the various factions to share power - a good thing on balance for inter-sectarian relations, though with some cost in governmental effectiveness. Zubaydi claims that the IIP would ensure a new government with a Sunni Arab bloc majority would include representatives of the other sectarian groups in leadership positions in the provincial government.

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SHI'A UNEASE

¶19. (C) Meanwhile, we are hearing more and more grouching from our Shi'a contacts about alleged Sunni Arab electoral violations in the December election. Given the vague nature of the complaints, the halfhearted way in which they have been pressed, and the uniformly positive reaction to the election from Shi'as prior to the announcement of the preliminary vote totals, these complaints would more accurately be taken as an indicator of Shi'a unease at the impending shift of power away from them within the province. The complaints that we have heard have involved voter intimidation by Sunni Arab pollworkers, the alleged practice by Sunni Arab pollworkers of allowing the Sunni heads of households to vote for their entire family while ensuring that Shi'as and Kurds could only place a single vote, and other vague glosses on the (not entirely unfounded) Shi'a conspiracy theory surrounding IIP overrepresentation on the Diyala IECI. (NOTE: A side effect of the reduction of the IECI office from 308 employees to 52 should be the end of this particular, recurring explanation for Sunni electoral success.)

COMMENT

¶10. (C) The provincial elections are still a long way off (though this may not be clear to much of the province's political elite), but perceptions are already driving a shift in power towards the province's Sunnis, as Shi'a politicians appear progressively more willing to compromise with both Sunnis and Kurds. Conversely, the Sunni bloc appears to have become less obstructionist in the limited political interaction that has occurred since the election. Perhaps the latter change is a

result of an increased feeling that their position in the province is secure; it also may be a desire on the part of the disciplined provincial branch of the IIP not to make any move that would affect negotiations for government formation at the national level.

DEAN